



# From Cairo diva to bank cleaner

The life of Egyptian singer Souad Zaki is a riches to rags story in which the star exchanged fame in Egypt for a harsh life in Israel. Now her granddaughter is telling her story in a documentary that opens at the UK Jewish Film Festival. **Helga Abraham** speaks to the filmmaker about her remarkable grandmother

Lovers of Middle Eastern music and culture are in for a treat with Israeli director Iris Zaki's latest documentary, *Egypt, A Love Song*, due to be shown at this year's UK Jewish Film Festival. The film is an ode to Iris's paternal grandmother – the legendary Egyptian Jewish singer Souad Zaki – and something of a quest for the filmmaker's own roots and identity. It is also a moving love story with a surprising denouement.

Souad was born in 1915 to a well-off family in Cairo and very soon made a name for herself on Egyptian radio as a talented singer, Miss S. She went on to star and sing in movies and was even asked by iconic singer Umm Kulthum to co-star with her in the 1945 film *Salamah*. The phenomenon of famous Jewish female singers in Egypt – Souad's luminous Jewish contemporaries were Layla Mourad and Faiza Rushdi – reflects the extent to which Jews were well integrated in Egypt before the 1948 war and the birth of the State of Israel. Another factor, as Iris points out, was that: "It was easier for Jewish women to perform in public because they were freer and did not suffer the same restrictions as Muslim women."

Souad's integration went even further when, against her family's wishes, she married celebrated Egyptian qanun player Mohammed Elakkad. But, unlike Mourad,

who converted to Islam and lived all her life in Egypt, Souad remained staunchly Jewish – a factor that ultimately turned into a blessing when, in 1948, her life and career suddenly began to unravel. From New York, where he had gone to find fame, Elakkad filed divorce papers and planned to sue for custody of their three-year-old son – as was his right under Muslim law. When Souad found out that Elakkad's lawyer had instructed the Egyptian embassies of every Arab country to arrest her if she tried to enter with their son, she realised the only country that would give them asylum was Israel.

So, in 1950, at the height of her career, Souad fled to Israel to start a new life, in a new country, with a new language and culture. The landing was hard. For seven years, the former star lived with her son in a ma'abara (transit camp), where the housing consisted of tin shacks and primitive sanitary conditions. She now called herself Mazal and was a single mother who had to fend for herself.

She found work singing once a week on Israel Radio's Arabic service and occasionally in cafés and at family functions. But her income was basic and certainly not enough to cover the cost of the private education she insisted on giving

her son Moshe. So she took a cleaning job in a bank. The bank did not know she was a musical star and Israel Radio did not know she worked as a cleaning lady.

"My grandmother never talked about how hard life was for her in Israel," says Iris. "She was always laughing and never bitter. I think this is typical of Egyptian people and the way they deal with life."

Iris wanted to set many scenes of her film in Egypt, but the reality of today's geopolitics made it impossible. There may be diplomatic peace between Israel and

Egypt, but normal cultural and economic relations are practically non-existent since they are discouraged by the Egyptian authorities. "There was always the risk that, as a film crew, we could be arrested for spying or some other charge and I couldn't

take that risk," says Iris regretfully.

In a shocking act of retribution against Souad for fleeing to an enemy country with the son of a Muslim, the Egyptian government burned all her recordings and movies and her voice was never heard again on public radio, although in private she still has a considerable fan club in Egypt and across the Arab world.

But Iris's father, Moshe, did make one happy discovery about the singer when he

came across copies of Souad's films while scouting around the Edgware Road, in London. It emerged that many of the newer copies had cut out or substantially reduced Souad's appearances in her movies, but Iris managed to locate older versions that were still intact. This beautiful black and white material forms a graphic part of her movie, which is intersected with dramatised reconstructions, archival material and personal interviews.

Sadly the filmmaker has had to come to terms with the fact that her movie will never be shown in Egypt or any other Arab country. "It is sad because 60 percent of

the film is in Arabic and the movie is very much a celebration of Egypt," says Iris. In part, she also sees her movie as a 'tikkun' – a Hebrew word meaning 'amending' and symbolising rectification for the harsh treatment inflicted on her grandmother by the Egyptians.

The film also recounts the story of Iris's father, Moshe. Thanks to his mother's sacrifices, he excelled in his studies and went on to become a psychologist and an officer in the Israel Defence Forces. His father, Elakkad, in the meantime had started a new life in the US, with a new wife. It was only in 1962 that, out of the blue, Moshe received a letter from his father containing a ticket to New York. Approaching old age, Elakkad wanted his son by his side. But, now a proud Israeli, Moshe refused to leave his adopted

country. The two maintained a distant but warm relationship.

When Elakkad's American wife passed away, he tried to compensate Souad for past neglect by sending her a ticket to New York that included a luxury tour of the US. She promptly tore up the ticket. But in a bombshell turnaround a little while later, she flew to New York and proceeded to remarry Elakkad, whom she had sworn "she would kill if she ever saw him again". The two lived in New York for six years, before returning together to Israel, where they settled in Haifa.

In the film, Iris wonders why her grandmother decided to reunite with her ex after he had treated her so badly. Her father replies: "Elakkad was always in her heart and perhaps it was also because he was the only one who remembered her as a beautiful young star."

Elakkad died 11 years before Souad and is buried in a Muslim cemetery in Haifa. Souad died in 2004, aged 89, and is buried in a Jewish cemetery, also in Haifa. "Although she was totally blind in her old age, she was always jovial," remembers Iris. "She made a huge sacrifice for her son, but she never regretted her move to Israel and she never harped on about the past."

She was, in fact, an incarnation of the Egyptian proverb that she used to tell her granddaughter, the words of which appear on the screen early in the film: "Keep away from trouble and sing to it." ■

Clockwise from top left: Nur Fibak as Souad Zaki in a clip from the film showing the singer working as a cleaner; director Iris Zaki with her father, Moshe; photo of Souad's husband Elakkad and Moshe



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*Egypt, A Love Song*, directed by Iris Zaki (2022) is showing at the UK Jewish Film Festival, which runs 9-30 November. For details, see [ukjewishfilm.org](http://ukjewishfilm.org) and *What's Happening*, p55. Helga Abraham is a journalist and translator.